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A Conversation with Bernardo Gutiérrez: Exploring Technopolitics in Latin America

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In this conversation, Bernardo Gutiérrez examines the multifaceted roles played by digital media technologies in the processes of resistance and emancipation of several Latin American countries, with a particular focus on Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia. Relying on his extensive experience as a journalist and activist, and on the preliminary findings of his new project funded by Oxfam, an international confederation to find solutions to poverty, an injustice around the world, he argues that the similarities among these new mobilizations have to be looked for in their technopolitical architecture and in the forms of organization-action they assume, rather than in their demands, shared ideologies, and grievances.²

Keywords: Latin America, technopolitics, social media, distributed leadership, connected multitudes, #YoSoy132 movement, Passe Livre movement

Introduction

On June 4, 2015, I began a long and stimulating conversation³ with Bernardo Gutiérrez on Latin American social movements and the relevance of digital media and new technopolitical processes within contemporary protests. Born in Madrid, Spain but raised in Caracas, Venezuela, Gutiérrez's life has been a constant ping-pong between Europe and Latin America. He lived in Central America from 1999–2000,

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spent several seasons in Mexico and visited all the countries in the region, writing and developing projects as a journalist in the years that followed. In Brazil he lived in Belém do Pará and Rio de Janeiro from 2003–2009 and then moved to Madrid. In 2011 he returned to Brazil (São Paulo) and has since been travelling throughout Latin America, researching social fights and developing networked projects. Gutiérrez owns a network called *futuramedia.net* that develops collaborative projects based on free culture and urban participation. Connected to the global ecosystem of researcher-activists (the group coordinated by Javier Toret⁴ and others in Latin America), Gutiérrez has collaborated with the *Flok Society* in Quito⁵ and has published widely on global protests: He was in New York during Occupy, in Mexico before and after the #YoSoy132 movement, in Athens at the end of 2014, and in Istanbul during the first months of 2015. He also covered the advent of Evo Morales in Bolivia; he was with Marcos and the Zapatistas; in Chile he was with the movement of the Penguins; and he reported on the *lulismo* in Brazil.⁶ At present, he is involved in a project with Oxfam on Latin American movements and technopolitical processes⁷ where he uses the experience developed in Europe and Latin America, blending activism, journalism, and social networks research.

Given his wide experience as a journalist, activist, and researcher at the forefront of contemporary Latin American insurrections, the reflections offered by Gutiérrez during our conversation deeply enrich the understanding of the communicative dynamics of modern contention in Latin America that lies at the core of this special section. Gutiérrez argues for the decisive role of digital media in transforming Latin American societies, underlining that all these insurgencies and mobilizations share, to some degree, some technopolitical characteristics that rely on horizontal, decentralized networks. His audacious argument—that the similarities among new Latin American insurrections must be found at the level of distributed and horizontal technopolitical infrastructures rather than within demands, shared ideologies, and grievances—provides a counterpoint to the more cautious and skeptical considerations developed in the other conversation (with Geoffrey Pleyers) included in this special section. We believe that these two diverse, well-informed postures toward the new cycle of mobilizations in Latin America provide the readers of this special section with a broad and useful spectrum of ideas, data, and conceptual tools in order to better “read” the intricate social processes and phenomena that shackle the social movements’ scenario in Latin America and at the global level.

⁴ <http://tecnopolitica.net/projects/global-revolution-research-network>

⁵ <http://flokociety.org/>

⁶ <http://isa-global-dialogue.net/on-lulismo/>

⁷ Description (in Spanish) of the Oxfam Project available at <http://www.inttal.com/index.php/offers/view/12179>

The New Logic of Technopolitical Insurgencies in the Latin American Scenario

Emiliano Treré:

Hello, Bernardo. Can you please tell me about your new Oxfam project on technopolitics and social movements in Latin America?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Of course, Emiliano. The global call by Oxfam was, let's say, more traditional, like "make me a 60-page policy brief with five case studies and that's it." I won the call and I decided to do it a little differently, and it was vital that I told them that I wanted to open the process, that I didn't want to work following the logic of a product, that I wanted to publish texts, graphics, mining data from Twitter and to study relational networks and publishing a series of posts, like seven or eight until the final delivery [product]. So let's say that I was able to do it my way, but in the end I guess they liked it because they understood they couldn't keep on working according to an old and boring vertical logic. It is beginning slower than expected. Theoretically the policy brief should have been ready already, but it will take me one more month to write it. We will do the infographics in July [2015] and focus on the evolution of indignation and the global mutation of #YoSoy132⁸ into #Yamecansé.⁹ It's been crazy, it is basically the work of a PhD dissertation but I have to do it in just six months.

Emiliano Treré:

So with what innovations exactly are you are trying to "hack" this project?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

First of all, with the logic of the open process. The logic of sharing the process and not thinking [of] the final product as the end of the process, but the process as a whole. What Wikileaks has taught us is that raw data are interesting and collective intelligence can work on it and come to its conclusions. The policy brief I will use is going to be interesting, but the process is more interesting than that, and the 30 interviews I will upload will be useful for many more people. Then, the fact that I introduced the network and data analysis in the analysis of the five countries (Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras) was also an innovation for them. And finally I was able to obtain [agreement] that the research will be [under] creative commons and not copyright, and this is innovative as well.

Emiliano Treré:

I'd like to follow [up] this conversation by asking you to talk about the evolution of contemporary Latin American social movements. What has changed since the cycle of the 90s in relation to demands, grievances, and of course, in relation to media practices and struggles related to communication? How is the last cycle begun in 2011 different?

⁸ <http://civicmediaproject.org/works/civic-media-project/yosoy132movement>

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-30294010>

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Well, I think that the global significance of the Zapatismo, especially in relation to issues of autonomy and organization, is undeniable. But I would say that it was the World Social Forum that represented the center of other possible conceptions of the world where Latin America played a central role, with of course influences from imaginaries of Southern Europe, especially Italy and Spain. The World Social Forum was pivotal, especially to situate on the table more inclusive social and political agendas that would eventually permeate the progressive governments that were taking power in the entire region, in Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia for instance. What happened is that on one side classical social movements incorporated themselves into the Latin American states in a very fast way, even if not always in a transparent way, because there was strong political cooptation, in line with the state-centered Latin American tradition where the government is the one that has to innovate at the political level and then redistribute to citizens. So the problem was that these movements ended up as being old and vertical, and the World Social Forum ended up as a very centralized platform as well, with 20–30 leaders, losing the opportunity to renew itself and to organize according to different logics.

Emiliano Treré:

So what has changed with the 2011 insurgencies and all that has occurred in the last five years?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

For me 2011 was the year when an “organizational communicative meteor” went through the global movements, starting with the Arab Spring and, above all, with the 15M and the Spanish *Indignados* that later evolved and was sort of rechanneled as Occupy. In Colombia, the student movements were very important and able to overthrow the *Law 30* and the *Law Lleras*¹⁰ that was a digital censorship law, connected with the fight of *Internet Necesario* in Mexico¹¹ and the *Sinde Law* in Spain.¹² But keep in mind that meanwhile the Chilean *movement of the Penguins* in 2006¹³ had already changed some forms of doing politics and protesting, as students organized themselves through SMS and mobile phones. 2011 was a great shock for Latin America, but at first Latin America did not recognize the “novelty.” It was still grounded in the “well, we have progressive, inclusive and Leftwing governments. We do not really need those Occupy-like networks.”

Emiliano Treré:

Let’s say there was a sort of one-year “delay” of the Latin American context in relation to the global scenario. Could we say that we had to wait until 2012 with the emergence of #YoSoy132?

¹⁰ <https://globalchokepoints.org/countries/colombia>

¹¹ <http://goo.gl/RLZvZK>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ley_Sinde

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_student_protests_in_Chile

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Yes, 2012 came, and the #YoSoy132 movement exploded, and for me that was really vital to reformulate and reimagine the discourses of the movements and of the networks. And it represented both a continuity and rupture with the Zapatismo, recognizing its legacy, but going further in a more urban way, less anchored to demands and reasons of traditional social movements, more spontaneous, chaotic, but at the same time fresher, more dynamic, and disruptive. Thus #YoSoy132 marked the beginning of self-organized revolts, with a new imaginary, a new narrative, a new form of communication starting from networks and an ecosystem that includes free software and hackers' tools alongside proprietary networks [such] as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which we can see as occupation of "pop spaces" that were ethically rejected by traditional social movements, because Facebook is on the "evil side," there's no privacy, data are turned to NSA, and so on. But movements were able to originally remix these tools.

Emiliano Treré:

And then of course we had Brazil in 2013 and the *Passe Livre* movement that you have explored at length.

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

The explosion hit Brazil in 2013, with the *Movimento Passe Livre*¹⁴ and then all the different forms of resistance that emerged once *Passe Livre* had lost control of the protest. And since June 17, 2013 they were not leading the conversation in the streets and in the networks, so we witnessed a phenomenon of emerging connected nodes that reconfigured the network system in another way. And this appropriation of proprietary tools [such] as Facebook and Twitter was really important. So to sum up, I think that between 2011 and 2013 we have had a very radical and powerful rupture in the ecosystem of the World Social Forum, in the traditional Left, and so on. It was not the well-known nodes of the traditional leaders, of the traditional cultural spots. It was another society, another kind of citizenship that was differently connected. And we witnessed a symbolic, methodological, and organizational break in the dichotomy between traditional Left and neoliberal Right that wasn't so manifest as in Spain or Greece, but still was very impressive.

Emiliano Treré:

So you argue that these new movements break with old and more traditional hierarchies and demands. And at the same time, they are new at the level of organization, structure, type of relationships they forge, and in their use of digital media and technopolitical tools.

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Yes, and let me tell you that Colombia for example is another really interesting country to see these changes because it comes from a "civil war" where traditional social movements are really important. In 2011, with the *Ley Lleras*, new actors and nodes emerged, a new ecosystem of free culture and free software, with Anonymous Colombia, Indignados Colombia linked to the 15M, with Red Carisma, Red Pa Todos, and the MANE. The MANE is the student organization that led the student revolts of 2011. It is a

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movimento_Passe_Livre

new organization that has nothing to do with traditional student organizations, which in Colombia weren't so relevant.

Thus a new ecosystem emerges, and we witness new forms of dialogue among the *Minga Campesina*¹⁵ from the analogue rural ecosystem and the urban digital youth that led to the 2013 *National Agrarian Strike*¹⁶ (*Paro Agrario Nacional*), which became one of the greatest protests in Colombia, where urban youth, students, hackers, intellectuals, digital rights defenders converged with some common horizons such as the fight against the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and the struggle against neoliberalism. So Colombia is a perfect example of this new multitude reconfiguring politics. Whereas in Brazil, the Workers' Party¹⁷ (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) killed the novelty, "dynamiting" the innovation process in the streets and in the networks and extremely polarizing the debate between "with-me-or-against-me" positions, so we can see that there are still manipulation mechanisms and vertical communication from parties and governments that want to end these emerging horizontal, plural, and decentralized processes.

Emiliano Treré:

Do you see some specific traits and characteristics in the insurrections and mobilizations of Latin American movements, if we compare them, for instance, with the North American or the European context? In particular, is there anything that you would say is *exclusive* to the Latin American context, especially in the use of digital media? And on the other side, what are the similarities in the use of digital tools?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

I think that it changes a lot from country to country. The richest and most complex technopolitical process was indeed that of Spain, but I see [it's] really difficult to make comparisons with all the continent. Latin America is so diverse, and each country has its own rhythms, histories, and developments. So we could probably compare some countries such as Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. There are plenty of differences and similarities. Many "old school" thinkers look for similarities in the wrong places: in the patterns, in the requests, the leaders, if they are left- or right-wing. But I think we have to look for similarities in the emerging organizational processes, in how the indignation detonates through emotional explosions, in how collective identities emerge and how from these identities, change is organized and generated; in how leaderlessness is claimed by most of these new movements. The Passe Livre movement in Brazil had a manifesto saying "We are none. We do not lead nothing. You should talk to the indigenous and the periphery." And, automatically, Dilma Rousseff¹⁸ invited her friends, the young leaders of the PT, and that was one of the most ridiculous moments ever. So this is not leadership. It is temporally distributed leadership that means that there are nodes that lead a concrete campaign, [such] as Passe Livre. Then the world soccer championship arrives, and that social ecosystem migrates toward another place. New

¹⁵ <http://goo.gl/kCUuQ5>

¹⁶ <http://borgenproject.org/national-agrarian-strike-colombia/>

¹⁷ <http://www.pt.org.br/>

¹⁸ President of Brazil since January 2011

collective identities arise, and nodes that weren't so relevant in June 2013, but that have gained strength during these years and are now leading the conversation and the campaigns.

Therefore, this temporal distributed network, this mutation in the network system, like in the case of the #YoSoy132 that evolved into #PosMeSalto¹⁹ and then #Yamecansé, make us reflect on the fact that these networks dialogue, they don't come out of nothing. These are new characteristics of the architecture of protest, of the organization of communication that is much more than communication.

Emiliano Treré:

So you are arguing that, especially in the Latin American context, similarities and differences have to be found more at the level of emerging organizing structures where digital communication plays a pivotal role, than at the level of shared demands, grievances, and ideologies?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Exactly, without a doubt. It seems to me we are in the era of the communication connection,²⁰ the communication that connects in real time. Clearly on Twitter you can see how in a hashtag the different nodes organized in real time and are almost not communicating; communication-action, a communication that mobilizes and produces and activates protest and campaign levers. All these characteristics—I think they are common to all these social explosions, these movements in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. It also happened in Perú with the *Toma la Calle* in 2013²¹ and then the *Toma el Bypass* with street occupations and a very liquid organization online, also in Colombia as I said before.

So I believe that these similarities have to be looked for in the architecture and in the form of organization-action, and not so much in the demands of these movements or in their alleged ideology, if they are left, center, or right.

Emiliano Treré:

Another element you often underline is the importance of the free digital culture, the hacker culture that surrounds and propels these movements.

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Yes, we have this "prototype culture," the culture of common repositories, where many people coming from free software and free culture generated this form of action during several years, this autonomy. Clearly, the strongest example of this, the 15M movement, was "cooked" by a hacker core that had clear ideas on the intersections between various repertoires of collective action and this comes from afar. It is that idea of prototype as unfinished model, a collective model, improved in real time by the collective intelligence, this constant beta state.

¹⁹ <http://goo.gl/FIcdwi>

²⁰ See also the model of connective action developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2013).

²¹ <http://www.revleft.com/vb/blog.php?b=18977>

Emiliano Treré:

Besides this free cultural milieu that you have just highlighted, you frequently refer to the significance of the emotional aspect and how these emotions are ignited by social media and digital communication technologies. Can you elaborate on this?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Yes, in almost all these cases—15M, Turkey, Occupy, Mexico, Brazil—there is a moment where the media and the system criticize them and laugh at them and insult them, like “They are just 131 students. They are Spanish hippies. They are vandals from Brazil.” So the network system, the collectives, and the nodes—the people react [by] appropriating the insult and turning it into something positive, like the “vinegar protest,” the revolt of the vandals, in Turkey it was *chapullers*.²² And then they created the *Chapul TV*; in Spain they did the *Yayo Flautas*,²³ the #YoSoy132 movement, you know, they laugh about us, so we will show them how strong we are. It’s a gigantic emotional appropriation that can be best appreciated in the enormous volume of tweets that during just one day usually explode. From this explosion a new imaginary emerges, and the new forms of organization of different connected nodes generate a new social process.

Emiliano Treré:

But this emotional explosion is not just in the online sphere, it’s everywhere in the squares. It also permeates the streets of the cities and of the villages where people meet, demonstrate, and protest.

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Of course, another similarity that I forgot to mention is the networks-streets dynamic, i.e., in the moment of highest emotional peak, people would abandon—at least partially—the digital space and flood the streets, occupy the squares, and so on.

We are talking, actually, of a hybrid space, made of networks and territories, of bits and asphalt, a remix, a confusion that is common to all these new contemporary movements. And this is actually similar throughout all Latin America, from the March of the Whores²⁴ in Quito, to more traditional movements in Bolivia, there is always an undeniable coexistence of the digital and the analogue, in some countries more than others, and in Mexico and Brazil very much so.

Emiliano Treré:

Mexico and Brazil are recurrent examples you refer to. Can you say more about these two contexts?

²² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapulling>

²³ <http://www.tubabel.com/definicion/45696-yayoflauta>

²⁴ <http://goo.gl/7e2ZaQ>

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Mexico is really interesting for its blend of appropriation of proprietary digital networks, hacker culture, together with collaborative processes grounded in the territory, various assemblies. I think that Mexico has been the country that connected more, that acted collectively, and that generated more collective identities. #YoSoy132 generated a wave of thematic cores around all Mexico; it was guided by the incredible ability of small visionary groups that knew well where the emotional mutations were headed. I think that Mexico was able to counteract really well the manipulation of mainstream media. Maybe because it is so gigantic and explicit, Mexico acted really fast and was able to counteract the lies and the manipulation in a really effective way, although protest was centralized in Mexico City and other big cities, so it wasn't able to bridge the breach with the analogue environs.

Emiliano Treré:

And what about your country, Brazil?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

Brazil is a world apart. The 2013 protests were explosive and fascinating, but technological appropriation wasn't that great. While people were using Facebook effectively, this was not the same case for Twitter. I think that was the key: Brazilian social movements weren't able to organize and to dialogue in real time because they had a problematic use of Twitter, among many other things—and quite important [for] anthropological historical reasons—inequality, for example. And also, as I commented before, the PT Party and the government were seducing and coopting activists. Many of them ended up having official posts promoted via Facebook. Many people that were activists working for independent media ended up working for the government and the PT, thus poisoning the social movement culture. What I see in Brazil is more [of] an impact at the level of change of subjectivities that we will be able to better evaluate in a couple of years. While in Mexico, the hacker and free software community supported and worked alongside social movements, in Brazil they were at the service of the State and generated a tension with hackers working for the government, losing all the meaning of the hacker ethic.

Emiliano Treré:

The terminology you use when you refer to technopolitics and technopolitical processes, connected multitudes, distributed leadership, [and] emotional explosions is obviously indebted to the new "Spanish school" that I know well, also because I have coedited another special issue in which some of them have participated²⁵ (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Language is really important. Do you think that these concepts apply well to the context of Latin America? Or that we should maybe try to work with other discourses, narratives, and communicative imaginaries born within Latin American traditions instead of "importing" concepts from Europe or North America?

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

That's a really good question. There's always the prejudice of "well, again they are using a theory from outside and new paradigms, like Negri's multitude, while we're heading in another direction." I believe

²⁵ <http://goo.gl/mESCXK>

that the novelty of this paradigm and of these concepts you mentioned is that, even if they have emerged from the technopolitical group of Spain, they have a global vision. It's not just about the 15M, but they include the mutations of Occupy, those of #YoSoy132, etc. There's a new vocation here that aims at creating a new paradigm of studies of connected multitudes based on big data extraction and analysis and on the explorations of temporally distributed leaderships. Raúl Sánchez Cedillo of Madrid was the first one to talk about the network system, based on Negri but going beyond him. Brazilian Rodrigo Nunes [in this special issue] is using it to explain the new Brazilian social ecosystem, for example. It's true that in relation to innovation of social movements' paradigms, Latin America is sort of stuck. The Friedrich World Protest Report of 2013²⁶ says clearly that the social epicenter that once was Latin America has moved to the Mediterranean, and so it's normal that it's the area that is producing innovation at the level of paradigms, as once Latin America did with the Zapatismo.

Emiliano Treré:

I'd like to finish this conversation by asking you about the future perspectives and horizons that—also based on your study—you see for Latin America regarding social movements, digital media, and technopolitical processes.

Bernardo Gutiérrez:

A lot of people have approached me after I began posting the data of the Oxfam project. I believe a new network of researchers is emerging, I want this to become an open, collective project in order to go on with the research on technopolitics in Latin America after the Oxfam brief is completed. I think more revolts are coming to Latin America. There is a new organized citizenship that does not fit anymore in old dichotomies like "with me" or "against me," "left" and "right." Maybe they are lefties in their values but not in the way they act and organize themselves, so there are many people doing a lot of things out of lefties' spaces, narratives, and organizations that are not right. But at the same time I think that neoliberals and the Right are trying to appropriate the indignation in the streets for their own agenda, saying "We are also made of networks. We do not have parties or flags." So we have to be continuously vigilant. In Brazil, it happened clearly during Passe Livre's protests and in 2015. The Left should learn to upgrade their symbols, narratives, and try not to stick only to red flags that are driving off this new progressive and tolerant citizenship that does not identify with the old, vertical practices of the traditional Left.

Emiliano Treré:

Thank you very much for this really interesting conversation, Bernardo. Beyond the richness of experiences and the diversity of contexts that characterize Latin American social uprisings, I believe that our conversation has contributed to underline some key aspects. First of all, the close relationship between the use of digital media technologies (in particular social media) and the organizational structure of contemporary movements: horizontal, decentralized, and with evolving distributed leadership. This kind of structure is in contrast with the vertical, centralized, old structures of both Left and Right parties and governments that have tried to co-opt people's rage and indignation, incorporating them into their

²⁶ The report is free and available at http://cadtm.org/IMG/pdf/World_Protests_2006-2013-Final-2.pdf.

traditional hierarchies, without understanding the need to learn from these new insurgencies not only at the level of their demands, but most fundamentally at the level of how they are structured, and are eventually able to “get things done” collectively. Secondly, if we are to analyze contemporary digitally enabled uprisings that are often based on a logic of sharing information collectively, openly, and freely, we—as academics and media professionals—are called to open more and more the *black boxes* of our own investigations, so [as] to produce results that directly benefit other researchers and give back to the same actors that are at the center of our academic endeavors.

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